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Trends in Syllabus Design in Japan

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1. Introduction

An EFL course syllabus is often a reflection of teachers' subscription to a particular methodological approach to the way they believe languages are to be learnt. Since a number of methodological approaches to EFL learning abound in SLA literature, it is unsurprising that there are numerous syllabuses to select from to administer in an EFL course. Some of these syllabuses have more commonality than others; however, that might not be so obvious without an analysis of their methodological underpinnings. Wilkins (1976) first attempted to distinguish between the large number of syllabuses by categorizing them into those that focus on what types of linguistic elements are to be learnt as opposed to those that focus on how language is to be learnt (White, 1988). Currently, the latter type of syllabuses find support in SLA research, while the former type of syllabuses are considered rather dated, in regards to global demands of English as an International Language. Nevertheless, these outmoded syllabuses continue to linger in Japan as the syllabus of choice, despite evidence of their inadequacies. Therefore, the purpose of this article is two fold: first, it analyzes the disparate syllabuses, which Wilkins categorized into two distinct groups; and second, it examines some of the reasons why archaic syllabuses continue to persist in Japan when modern syllabuses are available.

2. Disparate Syllabus Design

After analyzing the various types of syllabuses employed in language classrooms, Wilkins (1976) categorized them into two distinct groups: synthetic syllabuses and analytic syllabuses (McCarthy & Carter, 2001). White (1988) later expanded on Wilkins' classification and relabeled analytic syllabuses as Type A syllabuses and synthetic syllabuses as Type B syllabuses. However, Hadley (2001) states that this division does not infer that Type A syllabuses are better than Type B syllabuses or vice versa, and recommends avoiding such

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a view. However, the prevalent view is that Type A syllabuses represent a traditional stance of the language learning process and that Type B syllabuses reflect more on the needs of learning communicative competence in a global context is of the utmost importance. If that is the case, then what are some of the possible reasons that EFL teachers continue to administer Type A syllabuses in the classroom? This is especially noticeable in Japanese English language classrooms, where it is generally recognized that Japanese EFL learners struggle with acquiring communicative competency. In order to shed light on some of these reasons, this article analyzes first Type A and B syllabuses’ strengths and weaknesses under current SLA research, and second, the factors contributing to the tolerance of Type A syllabuses in EFL classrooms in Japan.

3. Type A Syllabuses

In a nutshell, White (1988) says that Type A syllabuses focus on what is to be learnt. This involves introducing specific elements of the language system step by step and independently from one another until the whole language structure has been built up. In the end, the language learner should be able to make sense of it all (Wilkins, 1976; Long & Crookes, 1993; Robinson, 1988). The rationale behind this method of language learning is that a gradual presentation of linguistic items in a serial sequence, from easiest to hardest, gradually allows language learners to accumulate a coherent language system (Lewis, 2001; Robinson, 1998). For instance, this might imply introducing grammatical elements in the order that typically follow the table of contents of a grammar textbook. This learning process requires teacher intervention and tends to be mostly teacher controlled (Long & Crookes, 1992) since the focus is on assimilation of rules to correctly learn the language. White (1988) considers the structural syllabus, the functional-notional syllabus, and the situational syllabus as members of this methodological approach to language learning.

3.1 Structural Syllabus

The structural syllabus is perhaps the most prevalent out of all Type A syllabuses (Rabbini, 2002). Since its focus is on form (Ho, 1981), it organizes grammatical items and structures (e.g., tenses, grammatical rules, and sentence patterns) in a particular order for learners to master (Nunan, 1988). This order follows from factors such as frequency, teachability, complexity, usefulness or any combination of these (White, 1988; Richard & Schmitt, 2002). Examples of some of the most frequent strategies of a structural syllabus are through response, repetition, and memorization, using imitation drills and substitution exercises (Freez, 2001).

One of the proclaimed benefits of the structural syllabus is that it is the most teacher-friendly approach to language teaching. Its organization allows language teachers to succinctly teach bits of language in manageable dosages for EFL learners to digest. It
also provides learners with a solid foundation of grammatical knowledge to ensure second language mastery (White, 1988).

Nevertheless, its focus on form detracts it from teaching meaningful interactive communication. EFL learners fail to become linguistically independent of teaching materials and fail to effectively put their bits of learning together in a holistic manner. As Nunan (1988) states, the linear approach to language teaching fails to recognize that learning does not occur in an additive fashion. Nunan’s claim is supported by SLA research which suggests that language items necessarily share a symbiotic relationship where progress in one area depends on progress in another area (Long & Crookes, 1992; Lewis 2001). Therefore, since a structural syllabus focuses on bits of linguistic items, it fails to show a clear-cut view of language as a system of interrelated elements (McCarthy & Carter, 2001; Willis, 2000; Nunan, 1988). According to Willis (2000), this fundamentally contradicts the way languages are learnt.

3.2 Functional-Notional Syllabus

A functional-notional syllabus arranges the language content in terms of functions or speech acts together with the language items necessary to complete this process (Ho, 1981; Richards & Schmitt, 2002). Such a syllabus presents language items as a list of realizations of semantic and pragmatic importance, such as: identifying, describing, inviting, and offering (Willis, 2000; Richard & Schmitt, 2002). Oftentimes, these language items are prioritized depending on the needs of the students or the structure of the language course (Willis, 2000).

There are numerous appreciable benefits to a functional-notional syllabus. EFL learners are able to acquire a high surrender value than if they were to learn EFL from a structural syllabus, which is deemed to have a low surrender value. Indeed, as Willis (2000) points out, “even after a short course, you would be able to make requests, ask for information, make suggests and so on, even if with a very low level of accuracy overall.”

However, the functional-notional syllabus has been criticized for a number of reasons. First, the innumerable amount of possible functional situations that an EFL learner could possibly face makes teaching an innumerable number of functional-notional linguistic terms rather daunting and likely impossible (White, 1988). In that case, even if EFL teachers to narrow down the list of possible functional situations, what criteria would be used? Indeed, the vast amount of possible functions in everyday life makes itemizing, ordering, and implementing a functional-notional syllabus a rather daunting challenge for any EFL teacher. In addition, Prabhu (1984; cited in White, 1988) states that it relies on the perspective that language acquisition involves input assimilation; that is, “what is taught = what is (or ought to be) learnt.” Finally, SLA research has shown that this is not how languages are learnt since there is unsupportive evidence to indicate that EFL learners acquire one function or notion at a time. EFL learning in this way frequently involves deterioration of learner’s performance (so called backsliding) and leads to U-shaped and zigzag development curves (Long & Crookes,
1992). Therefore, Long and Crookes (1992) state that materials used tend to be artificial and inauthentic, and Wilkins (1976) claims that the notional part in the functional-notional syllabus has rarely been implemented.

3.3 Situation Syllabus
A situational syllabus organizes lists of situations to reflect the use of language and behavior in the 'read world' (Freez, 2001). Oftentimes, a situation usually involves several participants who are engaged in some activity in a specific setting. Situations at the bank, supermarket, restaurant, and railway station, for instance, represent the focus of the situational syllabus (Richards & Schmitt, 2002; Freez, 2001).

One of the advantages of a situational syllabus is that it heightens EFL learners' motivation since it is learner-centered rather than subject-centered (Wilkins, 1976). EFL learners will understand the objective of the situation, making goal setting rather straightforward for EFL learners and teachers alike.

However, since it targets specific situations, it only provides a limited scope of the English language; and so has been commonly used in conjunction with the functional-notional syllabus (Rabbini, 2002).

3.4 Overview of Type A Syllabuses
To summarize, Type A syllabuses aim to make learning tasks easier by deliberately breaking down and presenting a limited sample of the language system into teachable bits at anyone time (Wilkins, 1976). Overtime, learners can take those language items and re-synthesize them to achieve linguistic mastery of the second language (Long & Crookes, 1993). However, Type A syllabuses face a number of theoretical challenges from SLA research (White, 1988; Lewis, 2001; Robinson, 1998; Fotos, 1998). Teaching bits of linguistic items in discrete manageable succession presents a false picture of language and runs the risk of making learners into automatons (Holliday, 2001; McCarthy & Carter, 2001). In addition, McCarthy & Cater (2001) state that Type A syllabuses ineffectively present language as people naturally speak it, write it, and how they manage interaction over extended language events. Therefore, all these factors could possibly demotivate EFL learners from taking a communicative interest in EFL learning (Long & Crookes, 1992).

4. Type B Syllabuses
Rather than focusing on what language elements are to be learnt, Type B syllabuses focus on how language elements are to be learnt. As White (1988) indicates, Type B syllabuses present language learning as a holistic process instead of learning discrete linguistic items one at a time. A comprehensive method of teaching allows teachers to start to exchange meanings as soon as possible with EFL learners (Willis, 2000). This allows EFL learners to
become aware of language forms to enhance their communicative skills. Therefore, Type B syllabuses are concerned less with prior selection and organization of the data and more with the ways learners may act upon and interact with such data, without much interference of the language learning process from the EFL teacher (Young, 1983).

4.1. Procedural Syllabus

Procedural syllabus is perhaps best exemplified in Prabhu’s Bangalore Project (1980). The principle behind the project was that linguistic form is most sensibly learnt when attention is given to meaning (White, 1988; Young, 1983). As a result, certain tasks and activities can facilitate meaningful communication instead of a specific focus on the language itself (Young, 1983). According to Prabhu (1980; cited in White, 1988), organizing a syllabus around a series of tasks allows language learners to say what they need in a communicative situation.

The benefit of this approach to language learning allow learners to engage with language in an effort to cope with active, spontaneous communicative dialogues (Lewis, 2001). This is done in accordance with the learner’s own rate of learning and language needs (White, 1988; Long & Crookes, 1993).

However, the Bangalore Project has faced criticism on how it accounts for its success. That is, none of Prabhu’s offered accounts provides sufficient evidence to evaluate the claims for a procedural syllabus and its associated methodology (White, 1988). In fact, as Graves (2001), points out, the insufficient evidence may reflect some rather dubious claims in Prabhu’s Bangalore Project. Furthermore, a number of questions have been raised as to whether the language learners in the Bangalore Project were ‘absolute beginners’ or learners with already a number of years of learning English in primary schools through, most likely, a structural syllabus. This may indicate that the Bangalore Project learners could have learnt the majority of grammatical patterning of English phrases, as well as some vocabulary, through Type A syllabuses. However, it is claimed, the procedural syllabus, in this case, acts to stimulate this grammatical knowledge into meaningful communicative competence.

4.2. Task-Based Syllabus

A task-based syllabus focuses on purely meaningful activities (Robinson, 1998). It involves a careful selection of content that incorporates needs analysis to choose the appropriate tasks for language learners (White, 1988). In doing so, it reflects real-world contexts that students face outside the classroom (Nunan, 1989; Long & Crookes, 1993).

Although SLA research supports task-based activities (Robinson, 1998), a number of problems are involved with designing and ordering tasks (Willis, 2001). This is partly resulting from the lack of empirical evidence supporting Type B syllabuses (White, 1988). In addition, task-based designers face problems in making tasks challenging and simultaneously engaging learners’ interest.
4.3. Process Syllabus

The process syllabus advocated by Breen & Candlin (1987; cited in White, 1988), proposes that tasks and activities form the basic unit of a syllabus to allow learners to use language in meaningful ways instead of learning language items. The focus is on the learner’s ability to acquire a language, which is something that is “internally prompted rather than externally imposed” (Willis, 2000). Thus, the emphasis is on negotiation of syllabus content between teacher and learner (White, 1988).

Some of the difficulties facing the process syllabus extend from its open-ended focus on structure to its high demands of gathering a wide range of resources. Also, teachers might lack the necessary skills and time to cope with the resources in an effective manner (ibid, 1988).

4.4 Overview of Type B Syllabuses

Type B syllabuses are intended to expose language learners to meaningful communicative activities and materials that help to promote conscious-raising and noticing of target grammar rules (Robinson, 1988). Since the focus is on the linguistic process rather than discrete grammatical items, the ELT curriculum is flexible enough to accommodate the needs of the learner. These are readily noticeable in Type B syllabuses such as: Procedural, Task-based, and Process syllabuses, which find support from SLA research. However, Type B syllabuses face a number of challenges in its organization. There is difficulty in selecting, grading, sequencing tasks and evaluating whether learners have acquired the linguistic meaning. Indeed, Young (1983) states that communicative materials are difficult to organize and are not amenable to the kind of systematic organization or categorization, which is applied when presenting language as a focus on form. Furthermore, it is challenging to create a consensus on the criteria to determine task difficulty (Nunan, 1988). Nonetheless, the present pace of syllabus design seems to favor Type B syllabuses over Type A syllabuses.

5. Syllabus Design in Japan

In Japan, the structural syllabus has a long history in EFL teaching and is the basis of many language programs (Robinson, 1998). Currently, a number of high schools surveyed continue to employ a structural syllabus as part of their language curriculum rather than Type B syllabuses. The reasons for this could possibly be accounted for by Japanese cultural and social values, which emphasize that good learners as passive learners (Hofstede, 1991).

Japan’s belief system has a direct impact on how Japanese English language teachers approach second language pedagogy, which ultimately influences the type of syllabus they adopt in the EFL classroom. Hofstede (1991), analyzed Japan’s cultural system to reveal that Japanese people are inclined to think, act, and respond to events in a particular manner. For example, Merkin (2006: 214) states, “They are made to be nervous by situations they
consider to be unstructured, unclear or unpredictable to the extent to which they try to avoid such situations by adopting strict codes of behavior and beliefs in absolute truths.” Therefore, Japanese language learners feel comfortable with structured teaching approaches that allow for passive, non-interactive learning. From such a belief system, it seems appropriate to use a structured approach to EFL learning. As a result, the PPP approach has been extensively employed in EFL classrooms, without considerable integration of other types of methods of language learning.

The social relationship between Japanese teachers and learners is another reason structural syllabuses continue to be employed in Japan. The sociocultural system is essentially hierarchical: the teacher’s role is that of an expert whose views the learner should not question (Hofstede, 1991). Therefore, EFL lessons tend to be teacher-fronted and the learners’ role tends to be passive (Pite, 1996). Learners expect their teachers to provide them with structured learning approaches with precise objective, detailed assignments and to be rewarded for their accuracy (Hofstede, 1991). As a result, language learners avoid taking the risk of making mistakes when it comes to producing meaningful communication. To do so would run contrary to the social relationship between teacher and learner and create a disrupting element into a relationship defined by its organization and hierarchical structure. In that case, lessons are test-driven and primarily concerned with grammatical items and right answers (Fotos, 1998). This allows students to prepare for ‘examination hell,’ which is typically a reflection of what learners have learnt of English and not of their ability to use English (ibid, 1998). For these reasons, the continual employment of the structural syllabus finds justification.

However, despite these cultural and social characteristics, there are demonstrably a number of pedagogical disadvantages in this kind of approach. It is inefficient and rather does not tend to result in fluency among learners. A number of Japanese EFL university students might have an impressive grasp of grammatical structures but lack the ability to speak to their teachers in a coherent manner. Furthermore, the PPP approach, which is at the heart of the structural syllabus, has been discredited by SLA research. Nevertheless, it continues to dominate the teaching strategies in all grades, starting from junior high school. On account of this, Japanese EFL learners are learning English for a purpose other than to communicate in English. Instead, they are preparing for a ritual initiation test using a version of English as its vehicle (‘examination hell’). Thus, the challenge is somehow to arrange things so English teaching as reflected in SLA research is able to gradually be incorporated and eventually became prioritized over other outdated methods of English language teaching. Arguably, this means making the English language classroom a different kind of place and the English lesson a different kind of event from the rest of the learners’ learning experience.
6. Syllabus Shift in Japan

Hadley (2001) and Fotos (1998) point out that Japan’s educational institutions lag behind its Western European and American counterparts. Hadley (2001) goes so far as to suggest that Japan’s ELT programs undergo language syllabus trends approximately eight to ten years behind Europe and America. What this means is that currently, Japan should be experiencing a gradual syllabus shift from Type A to Type B syllabuses. For some English teachers, the syllabus shift is most welcomed. With advances in real time communicative technology there must be an improvement in spoken communicative competence, which means real ‘communicative teaching’ with an emphasis on situationally-informed spoken real time language, and a corresponding examination emphasis on oral rather than written assessment. Arguably, the written assessment could be abolished or at least made to be less than half the exam, and then there would be real noticeable changes.

Nevertheless, despite the differences between Western European and North American syllabuses, when thinking of an appropriate syllabus design for Japanese EFL learners, it seems prudent to understand the meaning of appropriateness. If appropriateness is defined according to the socio-cultural factors of a country, then such a framework would suggest that Type A syllabuses are ideal for Japanese EFL learners. Therefore, it is unsurprising that a tremendous amount of value is placed on the test-product. That is, university entrance examinations can be considered the pinnacle of junior and high school education in general. Therefore, Japanese English language teachers tightly structure their lessons to actualize EFL learners’ success in these exams and other like it.

If, however, appropriateness is defined as the best way to learn a language, then Type B syllabuses are most appropriate since Type A syllabuses are considered outdated for this purpose. In addition, the EFL teacher must consider the end-product of education for EFL learners. As McDevitt (2004) says, the language learning process should allow learners to be able to make decisions, make choices and ask questions, which is liberating for both teachers and learners if the end-product of all education is to be an independent learner. McDevitt’s view is certainly ideal and definitely worth inspiring EFL learners to achieve. However, in Japan’s cultural, social and educational context, learners are taught to aspire for something rather different. As Hofstede (1991) points out, Japanese learners view their teacher as a disciple views a guru. Learners expect their teachers to provide them with a structured approach to EFL learning and to be rewarded for their accuracy. Therefore, the end-product in Japan does not seem to be an independent learner, but rather, unsurprisingly, a learner molded to Japan’s socio-cultural parameters.

Given these circumstances, arguably it is the duty of an English teacher to try and break down this kind of inter-generational stranglehold as much as possible, for a whole range of reasons—pedagogical, individual and indeed in the wider social context too—but without sacrificing one’s learners or becoming a casualty oneself. This is definitely not an easy problem to resolve.
7. Conclusion

In conclusion, the multiplicity of syllabus designs led White (1988) to distinguish between product-oriented syllabuses and process-oriented syllabuses. White labeled product-oriented syllabuses as Type A syllabuses and process-oriented syllabuses as Type B syllabuses. Type A syllabuses have both positive and negative aspects to EFL learning; however, recently they are being viewed as outmoded and outdated (Fotos, 1998). Type B syllabuses tend to correspond closely to SLA research. They tend to show awareness of learners’ needs, the order of language acquisition and the value of learner motivation to successfully acquire a foreign language. Indeed, in Western European countries, Type B syllabuses are customarily used (Hadley, 2001). On the other hand, Type A syllabuses may be appropriate depending on cultural, social and educational circumstances related to the country. In Japan, the primary focus of English language education seems to be preparation for taking entrance examinations into university and while at the university, studying for the TOEFL or TOEIC test. Therefore, in general, Type A syllabuses will continue to endure in Japan as a result. And change will most likely occur when less stress and importance is placed on these tests and more focus is given over to real communicative competence. Thus, when Type B syllabuses find their way into EFL classrooms in Japan, it will be an indication not only of a syllabus shift, but also a methodological shift as well.

Bibliography


